GUEST COLUMN

Utah should cash in on year-round wind power

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GUEST OPINION

As natural gas shortages send energy prices skyrocketing, renewable energy development is becoming increasingly urgent for the nation.

Wind, the most cost-effective renewable resource, is America's fastest growing energy source. During the past five years, it has enjoyed an average annual growth rate of 24.5 percent; utility-scale projects are now operating in 27 states.

Wyoming, Texas, Oregon, Nevada, Washington and California are promoting wind power development to help diversify electricity resources and stabilize energy prices. Utah could benefit by promoting wind development to help reduce the sting of natural gas shortages and unleash wind power's economic and environmental opportunities.

What's holding Utah back?

Earlier this year, controversy erupted over a permit for an anemometer, a wind-speed measuring device, that could lead to the development of a 30-turbine wind farm along the ridge of Traverse Mountain near Lehi. Nearby housing developers objected to the "unsightly" project because they feared it could hurt local property values.

A new study examining more than 25,000 property transactions near existing wind farms, however, finds no evidence that property values decrease as a result of being within view of commercial wind turbines. This is good news for landowners as it shows Americans accepting windmills as simply part of modern life.

Other wind power opponents claim Utah doesn't have enough wind. Among the 50 states, North Dakota is the windiest state, and Utah ranks in the middle. Rankings, however, don't tell the whole story.

In theory, North Dakota's wind capacity could meet more than a third of America's electricity needs. A lack of transmission infrastructure, however, makes its wind largely inaccessible. Most states, nevertheless, have accessible regional "pockets of wind" near transmission lines that can be harvested. California, for example, ranks 17th in terms of wind potential, but has tapped some of its wind pockets to lead the nation in wind power development.

In Utah, about 800 megawatts of cost-effective wind pockets exist in Beaver, Box Elder, Duschesne, Garfield, Millard, Morgan, Piute, Rich, San Juan, Tooele, Utah and Wayne counties. Washington and Oregon rank comparably with Utah in terms of windiness, and one of the largest wind farms in the nation, the Stateline Wind Project, runs along their shared border. With over 300 megawatts of capacity, it serves 21,600 homes.

While the proposed project on Traverse Mountain would provide a needed economic boost for Utah County, developing Utah's rural wind pockets would be a boon for smaller communities devastated by drought. How significant? The modest 50 MW wind turbine project in Gilliam County, Ore., provides some interesting statistics.

ECONorthwest, a private consulting firm based in Eugene, determined that the Gilliam County project's construction injected more than $8.5 million into the economy of the surrounding rural area. During the next 20 years, the project is expected to generate another $13 million (in 2001 dollars), supporting about 10 jobs a year with an annual wage well above Gilliam County's average.

In addition to jobs, wind power improves the tax base of rural communities to support schools and local services. In short, wind power is a year-round cash crop.

Utah should follow the lead of other states to harvest its lucrative pockets of wind and capitalize on the economic and environmental opportunities of America's fastest-growing energy source. For Utahns who find wind turbines visually unsightly, perhaps they should see them for what they are — 21st century icons of clean, price-stable, inexhaustible energy.

Utah shouldn't get left behind.

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